

---

Some Thoughts on the Political Development of the Japanese People

Author(s): David S. Spencer

Source: *The Journal of Race Development*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Jan., 1917), pp. 291-302

Published by:

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29738202>

Accessed: 01-08-2014 01:25 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



<http://www.jstor.org>

## SOME THOUGHTS ON THE POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE JAPANESE PEOPLE

*By David S. Spencer, D.D., Nagoya, Japan*

Japan is not America. The average American reader no more understands the political movements of the Japanese than he does their religious life, and for precisely similar reasons. Possibly thirty years residence in Japan may enable one to assist the American reader in understanding the Japanese character and political development.

Back of the surprising material developments, the business successes and failures, the apparently retrograde political movements, and the disappointing cabinet changes of these twentieth century days are still working certain forces which have their root origins in a distant past, and in peculiar conditions. Though space forbids a full discussion of these forces, let us note four of them, and consider their influence upon the present political life of the people:

1. The influence of race origin.
2. The influence of geographic and climatic environment.
3. The influence of feudal institutions.
4. The influence of the institution known as the family.

Other influences there are which still affect the nation's development, and of which an account should be made in a full discussion of the subject; but in the four above mentioned will be found much of interest for the student of political institutions.

Ethnologists and archeologists differ as greatly concerning the race origin of the Japanese people as they do concerning the location of the Garden of Eden. All will however admit that race origin is one of the elements which vitally affect the political development of any people.

Without any attempt to dogmatize upon the subject, it appears most probable that the Japanese race, as known

today, was formed out of at least four contributing race streams; first the Koro-pok-guru, or "Cave-men," possibly aborigines. Secondly, the *Ainu*, short, stout savages, exceedingly hairy, with white skin, high cheek bones, without any written language, and without religion except as nature worship.<sup>1</sup> A few thousand of these *Ainu* still remain in the northern island, but they cannot bear modern civilization any better than do our American Red Men. They are known in ancient Japanese chronicles as the *Yemishi*, and may have reached these islands from Kamschatka or Saghalien. They were followed by a third invasion from the continent, possibly through Korea, landing at Izumo, on the west coast, opposite Korea. These invaders were far above the *Ainu* in civilization, had advanced from the stone to the bronze age, built houses of wood in which to live, were slim and tall as compared with the *Ainu*, had the oval face, oblique eyes, black hair, and were comparatively light skinned. Their warlike qualities were evidently less developed than were those of their successors, and they had a hard time with their *Ainu* neighbors northward.

The fourth racial stream must have come from or through the Malaysian regions, probably via Formosa and the Loo-choo islands, aided by the "Black Tide," and landed in Hyūga, on the southern coast of Kyushu. This people were of short and stout build, with round face, straight eyes, flat nose and large nostrils, had strong fighting qualities, and were aggressive and progressive. They brought with them a grade of civilization still in advance of the Izumo sample, belonged to the Iron Age, made pottery with the wheel rather than by hand, and buried their dead in tombs built of rough stone, or of hewn stones in some cases. They seem to have moved northward along the shores of the Inland Sea, led by a stalwart warrior who became their first ruler, known as Jimmu Tenno, till they surprised the Izumo people by their presence in the section

<sup>1</sup> Longford, *Story of Old Japan*, p. 4. Kawakami, *Political Ideas of Modern Japan*, p. 15. Brinkley, *A History of the Japanese People*, Index. Brinkley, *Japan: Its History, Arts and Literature*, Index. Murdock, *A History of Japan*, Vol. 1, Index.

called Yamato, overcame them because of greater military prowess, and these two streams soon became amalgamated. Possibly both strains were of Mongoloid origin, which hastened their union. At any rate these two race streams united, began their conquest of the land northward, met the *Ainu*, who had come as far south as Fujiyama, and had given it its name, and with this sturdy *Ainu* contended for more than a thousand years for supremacy, finally driving him across the Tsugaru straits, into the northern island, Yezo.

Intermarriage between the Izumo and Hyūga humans seems to have been common from the start, and a certain amount of this race-crossing also took place with the *Ainu* branch, as is manifest in the physiognomy of the people of the northland. But some Japanese ethnologists seem to contend that their Izumo ancestors, though unequal in fighting qualities to their southern neighbors, were of stronger mental qualities, and by intermarriage among themselves kept their race blood measurably pure, and have furnished through the centuries the brains which have been the chief reliance of this people's advancement.<sup>2</sup>

That Chinese and Korean immigrants later came to these islands in smaller groups is well known, and must have had corresponding influence in forming the resultant racial amalgamation. At any rate we have here in Japan a most interesting racial mixture, offering to the student of national psychology a peculiarly inviting field. And of the effect of this admixture upon the development of the political life of the Japanese there can be no doubt. The race mixture in Japan is quite similar in some respects to that in Mexico, and might in these valleys have led to results similar to those found in the latter unfortunate country, had not their environment, their insular situation, favored a different outcome. The composition of the American nation furnishes a very different illustration, especially in its earlier and formative years.

<sup>2</sup> Kawakami, *Political Ideas of Modern Japan*, p. 18. Brinkley, *Japan: Its History, Arts and Literature*, Vol. I, p. 38.

If racial origin affects political development, so does external environment. Located between  $21^{\circ} 45'$  and  $50^{\circ} 56'$  north latitude, corresponding approximately to the southern point of Florida on the south, and the most northern reaches of Maine on the north, these islands furnish a wide variety of climate. It is neither injuriously cold nor hot. Like all insular climates, there is great humidity in the atmosphere, which to a certain extent detracts from the physical powers. But this very insular location has mightily contributed to the nation's development. It has kept outside enemies from reaching them, when the race was too weak to offer strong defense; it gave them a chance to fight out their own battles without interference from without, to cudgel themselves through centuries of strife into a national unity which is unique. In 2000 years no foreign foe has been able to effect a landing upon their shores, God's winds blowing to their destruction the ships of the one enemy who in the thirteenth century attempted it. The value of this national isolation during their formative period is not likely to be estimated too highly.

As the entire Japanese archipelago is the product of volcanic forces, and these forces still remain to some extent active, the race has been cradeled amidst physical horrors. Betimes swept by typhoons, rent by seismic force, inundated by tidal waves, made homeless by enormous fires, the people have come to expect calamity and to endure disappointments and hardships with stoical indifference, so that foreigners have sometimes mistakenly supposed they were lacking the ordinary human feelings. Their ability to meet the most humiliating defeats and the most tragic losses with placid and even smiling countenances helps to an understanding of many of their acts as seen in times of political or social defeat.

A third and most powerful formative force in the Japanese national life was feudalism. The seeds of this feudalism were probably sown as far back as the reign of Sujin, 97-30 B.C. In order to control the people, following a pestilence, which had decimated the population, the emperor appointed four generals to control the four circuits or

sections of the country. "The leaders chosen for this task were all members of the imperial family."<sup>3</sup> "Whole regions were assigned to similar officials whose responsibility was limited to the collection of taxes for the use of the court."<sup>4</sup> Later there came into existence an office known as the Sei-i-Tai-Shogun (barbarian subduing great general). To such officers fell the duty of driving northward the stalwart *Ainu* and reducing the country to order, tasks covering a thousand years. At first these offices had to be surrendered when the particular task in question had been accomplished. Later the occupants of such high positions schemed to retain their positions and powers, and they gradually succeeded in doing so.

Another important influence operating in this connection was the establishment of the *Uji*, or families, which became the unit of society in Japan, of which more later.

When heads of these families led military expeditions to disturbed parts of the empire, their successes in tranquilizing the country were afterward followed by their settling down in a conquered section, gathering their followers about them, especially the soldiers who had helped them to win their victories, changing their names with or without the emperor's consent, and thus setting up a clan of *Han*. The members of this *Uji*, *Han* or clan, "were considered to form one united family, bound not only by the ties of interest and safety, but by the fiction that all had a common origin with their chief. They became hereditary soldiers, whose sole trade was fighting, who scorned all other pursuits." As these *Han* grew in numbers and strength, each became more and more a law unto itself, especially so with those situated at a distance from the seat of government, and gradually came to defy adjoining *Han*, and finally, in large measure, the central government itself. In fact the stronger houses, each in its turn, ultimately came to control the nation. Though ever careful to declare that they were conducting governmental affairs at the command and

<sup>3</sup> Brinkley, *A History of Japan*, p. 79, 80, 95, 128. Brinkley, *A History of Japan*, p. 67, 331.

<sup>4</sup> Murdock, *A History of Japan*, Vol. I, Index, "Feudalism."

in the name of the imperial person, they actually set up and pulled down emperors at their own pleasure, often placing upon the throne mere children or infants, and pretending to administer at their command.

As may well be supposed, the imperial power became a mere name, the real power being military, wielded by the heads of successive families as they might, by hook or crook, be able for a time to gain the ascendancy. Of course intrigue of every possible sort became the order of the day. The influences of religion, of clan intermarriage, of wealth, of diplomacy, and much more were called in to aid the ambitious feudal lord in gaining control of the government. This strife between the various feudal lords, located as they were in different sections of the country sometimes contiguous, sometimes widely separated, and with poor traveling facilities, naturally encouraged the retinue of one such lord to be ever on the watch against the retainers of every other lord. Loyalty to the country in a broad sense had no existence. The imperial house became a mere name to the mass of the people. The individual Japanese naturally thought first and always of his feudal lord, who was his protector, his preserver, the source of his daily supplies, and the giver of all he possessed. His property, including his wife, his home, his children, his body, were somehow felt to be the gift of his lord. His supreme loyalty was not to a set of lofty principles, of worthy national ideals, but to a *person*, and that person his feudal lord. Whatever that lord might do or command, was right, not because of its intrinsic moral qualities, but because he did it. Great men were lords while living, gods to be worshipped thereafter. "Their gods were only men of power or renown."<sup>5</sup>

Traveling facilities by land were exceedingly meager and even if the traveler would venture beyond the bounds of his clan, he must carry a passport, as though going to a foreign land. His speech, his manner, would be ever betraying him to the members of another clan, and conditions

<sup>5</sup> Clement, *A Short History of Japan*, p. 7.



such as these tended to make spies of the whole Japanese race, and fill every man with suspicion against every other man. The natural confidence of man in man, which to the Anglo-Saxon seems to possess so great moral, social and political value, was sadly disfigured. Even the representatives of religion, the priesthood, proved under this condition of affairs disloyal to their own teachings, and joined in the race for clan supremacy on one side or the other, and were guilty of every crime in the calendar. The political history of Japan for a thousand years is a story of this sort of feudal strife, of clan intrigue, first one great house, then another being able to gain the ascendancy, and control the imperial house, dominate the capital, and extend its will by force over more or less of the whole nation, culminating in the Tokugawa régime which controlled more effectively than any previous family had done the whole of Japan for a long period, 1603–1868.

From the above all too brief account of the course of Japanese national development, the reader might draw wrong inferences as to the relative force of feudalism and the family in the formation of this people, for in their workings the two institutions are inextricably mixed. The feudal system ultimately developed into a privileged military class, known as the *Samurai*. In China the gentleman was above all else a scholar; in Japan the gentleman was above all else a soldier, a fighting man, whether he could read or not. This privileged or governing class did not, it is estimated, exceed 5 per cent of the population; yet for long years they ruled the country, while the balance of the people were plebeians, and 75 per cent of them farmers. Nor must it be inferred that there were no clan defections, no crimes which resulted in excluding men from their clans, or that this spirit of clan loyalty always held men to worthy deeds. It did not. Men often sought for reasons of supposed betterment to transfer their allegiance from one clan to another. Some, falling into disgrace in the clan to which they belonged, left it, and became *rōnin*, or wandering men, roughs, rowdies, ready to sell themselves to any lord who might be willing to admit



them to his sheltering fold. Such were the leaders of the riots in Tokyo, on the announcement of the Portsmouth treaty. But these men were always comparatively few. The thing to keep in mind is that this feudal system, instead of training men individually to become strong citizens, intelligent members of the body politic, moved by lofty principles, and held by right moral standards, taught men rather to lose their individuality in an over-lord, a paternal, controlling force, that did for them everything they needed in return for their unquestioning obedience and loyalty to the chief of the clan.

We have already mentioned the institution called the family, and hinted at its bearing upon the formation of the nation, but we must now go still farther in this direction, to discover how the family was managed in such a way as to tend to produce the same qualities or characteristics in the Japanese citizen which the feudal régime produced.

In earliest Japanese history the inhabitants of Japan were divided into three classes, as follows:

*Shimbetsu*: *Kami*, or divine class.

*Kwōbetsu*: Imperial class, all emperors from Jimmu Tenno downward. The premier class. The heads of its families possess special rights.

*Bambetsu*: Aborigines and immigrants from foreign lands.

The *Shimbetsu* was again divided into sub-classes, as follows:

1. *Tenjin*, descendants of the primeval deities, prior to the Sun goddess.

2. *Tenson*, or descendants of the Sun goddess to Jimmu's father.

3. *Chigi*, or chiefs found in Izumo by the messengers of the Sun goddess, or in Yamato by Jimmu.

In addition to the above great divisions, the entire nation was divided into *Uji*, as mentioned above. An *Uji* founded by one of the *Tenson* took precedence of all others, the next in rank being one with an imperial prince for an ancestor; then came families founded by the *Tenjin* or *Chigi*. It is not to be supposed that one of these families consisted simply of the husband and wife, children, servants

and slaves. There were great *uji* and small *uji*, the former being made up of many of the latter. An *uji* comprised all who bore the same family name, and recognized one person as the head of the whole family or house. At first these family names were few; but as the population increased, the family names multiplied. The first family chiefs all sprang from the imperial house, and were related to the reigning sovereign; but subsequent emperors permitted the formation of new families from time to time. Thus the Nakatomi, Soga, Fujiwara, Hōjō, Minamoto, Taira, Takogawa and other great families one after another sprang into being. The heads of these families had court rank, and wielded great influence.

In the *uji*, the law of primogeniture was paramount. A successor to headship must be the eldest son of an eldest son. This family chief ruled the entire *uji*, or family, and controlled all the property. The head of an ordinary *uji* governed all the members of that *uji*, but was under the control of the head of the great *uji*. All matters pertaining to the *uji* were settled by the family council of that *uji*, and nothing was referred to the imperial court or government except in most serious cases. As a rule, all the members of one *uji* belonged to one occupation, and the business was hereditary.<sup>6</sup> All the members of such a family were held responsible for the conduct of each member thereof. If one committed a crime, the others must follow and find him, and bring him to justice. If he failed to pay his debts or taxes, as some did, whole households sometimes absconding to avoid the heavy imposts, the others must pay his taxes till his return, or for a period of years, and must pay his debts. If this meeting of moral and financial delinquencies proved a sort of protection to society, on the one hand, is it not clear that it just as surely, on the other, tended to excuse the delinquent and encourage him to risk the frowns of the members of his family in order that he might satisfy his own lusts and love of ease? The theory of the family was that the individual member sur-

<sup>6</sup> Brinkley, *History of Japan*, pp. 92-93 and Index. Longford, *The Story of Old Japan*, pp. 84-85.

renders his personal wishes, and even rights, for the common good. His labor must accrue to the benefit of the family; his education is to promote the interests of the family; his marriage must be made for the continuance and convenience of the family; his wife is chosen for him, not to suit his personal wishes, but those of the family. Carried to its logical conclusion, this family management tended to create a citizen dependent upon those above him for his opinions, his moral standards and his initiative. If he were a strong character, enterprising, progressive, the family regulations tended to restrain his natural aptitudes to the limits of supposed family interests. If he were easy-going, inclined to defer to others, his tendency to shirk was encouraged.

It is worth while to note how each family became, in all family matters, a law unto itself; how it relieved each individual in large measure from personal responsibility; and yet how, at the same time, it encouraged each and all to look for suggestion and direction to those around and above. Loyalty is again centered in a *person*, but that person is a man. All initiative for the family would naturally come down from its chief, or from the great *uji*; all orders for the citizen emanating from the government were handed by the proper officer to the head of a great *uji*, and by him passed down to the head of the small *uji*, and so to the individual. Demands for military service were made to the house; taxes were levied upon the house; responsibility for religious observances fell upon the head of the house, and individual religious obligation, duty, service would concern the citizen only as it came from the head of the house. It will, therefore, be readily understood how natural human ties as well as allegiance to high moral principles often seemed easily to give way to the demands of loyalty, as expressed in the feudal order of the day. Captain Brinkley has put this matter so well that I quote him at some length:

The ties of consanguinity snapped easily in medieval Japan when subjected to the strain of ambition or of loyalty. A vassal's duty to his chief outweighed the claims of filial piety, and men

<sup>7</sup> Brinkley, *Japan: Its History, Arts and Literature*, Vol. 212-213.

were frequently confronted by the dilemma of having to choose between two during an era when great houses, whose heads and dependents had long been on terms of close friendship and inter-marriage, were driven by the exigencies of the times into opposite camps. On the eve of the fight at Sekigahara, which finally established the Tokugawa sway over the whole of Japan, Sanada Masayuki and his two sons, Nobuyuki and Yukimasa, had to consider whether they would join the Tokugawa chief, Iyeyasu, or enter the camp of his enemies, the Osaka party. The old man declared that his obligation to the Tokugawa bound him to their side; his sons said that they could not forget what the *Taiko* (Hideyoshi) had done for their family, and that they would sacrifice their lives in the Osaka cause. The three men parted in the most friendly manner. It is recorded that Masayuki repaired to the house of his elder son in order to bid a last farewell to his daughter-in-law, and his grandchild. But Nobuyuki's wife would not admit him. "The bond of parent and child is broken," she said, "since each has espoused a different cause. I should be untrue to my husband if I did not exclude from his house an ally of his enemy." The old man expressed profound satisfaction with a reply so true to the dictates of the *bushi-do*. He survived the battle, but his two sons perished. The spirit dictating such acts is well displayed in a letter addressed to the mother of Koda Hikoyemon to her son. The latter with his liege lord, Oda Nobutaka, had espoused the cause of the *Taiko's* enemies, and thus the lives of Hikoyemon's mother and of Nobutaka's mother, who were held hostages in the *Taiko's* hands, became forfeit. The *Taiko* threatened to put the women to death unless their sons returned to his camp, whereupon Hikoyemon's mother wrote to her son: "Fealty to his lord is the first duty of every man in the empire, and it is the law of nature that parents should die before their children. My life is sacrificed to the cause of our lord and the cause of our house. Let no one mourn for me. Do you, true to the way of the warrior, and the path of filial piety, remember that to have a mother is no reason to be unfaithful." This brave lady was crucified.

It therefore comes to about this: The sum total of the influences of both feudalism and the family institution, as exerted upon the individual Japanese, has tended to produce a person, a citizen, differing in essential respects from the average American, Englishman or Frenchman. And when this Japanese citizen, thus trained for centuries, is called upon to bear the responsibilities of citizenship on a modern world, should it be thought strange that he should act differently from what an American, an Englishman or a Frenchman would act under the same circumstances?

His racial, his geographical and climatic, his political and his family and social training have had an immense influence upon his character, and have differed very greatly from that which the American citizen gets. That the nation's past did not properly fit men to meet the nation's needs in the modern world would seem to have been sufficiently demonstrated by the complete breakdown of feudalism in the middle of the nineteenth century. It was not Commodore Perry who ushered in the new Japan. He was simply the providential man to aid the smooth working of the evolution long delayed and sure to come.

Why this Japanese citizen has deported himself during the Meiji era as he has, must occupy our attention in a second article.